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# Improving race relations in prisons: what works?

Tom Ellis  
Catherine Tedstone  
Diane Curry

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Prison statistics have shown for a considerable period of time that people from black and minority ethnic groups (BMEs) are over-represented in the prison population (Home Office Statistical Bulletin 21/94). The Prison Service must therefore manage a population in which issues of discrimination against and between prisoners will occur. Although the Prison Service has had a race relations policy for 18 years, until now, there has been no clear evidence of how prisons have implemented these initiatives on the ground to reduce levels of discrimination against prisoners.

### Key points

- The results show that race relations in prisons can be significantly improved and that the scale of those improvements can be measured over time.
- The approach requires collaboration between prison managers and staff and the action research team to be negotiated in advance. It also requires commitment by senior prison managers to implement change on the basis of the evaluation results.
- An action research approach links local policy decision-making with research evidence by providing rapid feedback to managers.
- The approach has potential use as part of the prisons inspection process.

Over the last 18 years, the Prison Service has revised its race relations policy several times. The latest Prison Service Order on Race Relations was published in 1997, (PSO 2800), the Prison Service Race Relations Group (PSRRG) was established in 1998, and initiatives such as RESPOND and RESPECT have now been implemented (see Clements, 2002 for a summary of recent initiatives). Until now, the main focus has been on the diversity agenda for prison staff, rather than prisoners' experiences (Clements, 2002). However, in 1999, the Prison Service, on the recommendation of PSRRG, commissioned this research to measure to what extent discrimination against BME prisoners could be reduced and to identify the process by which this is best achieved. The results reported here outline the main findings from this pilot action research programme carried out in three prisons in the North West of England between the end of 1999 and mid-2001.

### The evaluation

In the last 12 years, the Prison Service and Home Office have commissioned two key pieces of research into race relations in prison (Genders and Player, 1989; Burnett and Farrell, 1994) showing clear evidence of prisoners experiencing both direct and indirect racism and discrimination. Both studies found that the key ways in which this occurred were:

- Verbal abuse, threats and other harassment in prisoner-staff and prisoner-prisoner relations.
- Physical abuse in prisoner-staff and prisoner-prisoner relations.
- Prison officers' differential use of discretion over offences, punishments, complaints and re-categorisation.
- Lack of specialist products (food, hair products, magazines, etc).
- Differential allocation to cells, wings and other prisons.
- Differential knowledge about race relations liaison officers.
- Differential access to jobs, training and education.

A more recent snapshot survey by NACRO (2000) also found similar results.

Our evaluation built on the findings of these studies. The key aims of the project were:

- to identify the extent to which issues of direct and indirect racism and discrimination were present in each of the prisons;
- to formulate an action plan with prison management and staff to reduce discrimination in areas clearly identified as problematic;
- to negotiate the implementation of targeted interventions with prison management; and
- to measure whether these interventions had been effective.

This exploratory research should be viewed as a pilot study, since this type of action research has not been applied to this issue before, either in the UK or elsewhere. This relatively new approach requires the evaluators to identify problems, practitioners to take action to address those problems, and the evaluators to measure the impact of the actions taken. This interactive approach is a mechanism by which good practice can be developed rapidly.

Action research also requires good collaboration between all those involved in the research. Researchers from the Institute of Criminal Justice Studies designed and analysed questionnaires which were administered to BME prisoners by Partners of Prisoners. Partners of Prisoners has extensive experience of delivering interventions in prisons for BME offenders and of negotiating change with prison managers. In this study, Partners of Prisoners were also involved with prison managers in formulating action plans based on issues identified in the questionnaires.

In each prison, Partners of Prisoners administered evaluation questionnaires to all BME prisoners present on a single day. This included help with filling in the questionnaire by Partners of Prisoners where necessary (usually due to language or literacy difficulties). The Institute of Criminal Justice Studies produced a report based on analysis of the returned 'before' questionnaires and suggested action points for identified problems with racism and discrimination. Partners of Prisoners then negotiated changes to policy and practice within each prison, through a management action plan, to target the issues raised by this first stage of the evaluation. When Partners of Prisoners were satisfied that sufficient time had elapsed for any changes to take effect, they returned to the prison and re-issued the same questionnaires to all BME prisoners present on a second single day. The Institute of Criminal Justice Studies, evaluators analysed the extent to which the action taken had been successful in reducing previously identified problems. We used a simple, but robust, four cell chi-squared test to measure that any identified differences between two relatively independent 'before' and 'after' samples were significant.

Overall, 306 prisoners returned questionnaires out of a potential population of 412 present on each of the occasions Partners of Prisoners visited the three prisons: a response rate of 74 per cent. Nearly 90 per cent of all BME respondents defined themselves as either black, or Pakistani.

**Table 1: Response rate and sample characteristics**

	'Before' n and response rate		'After' n and response rate		Black prisoners %		Pakistani prisoners %	
	n	rate	n	rate	Before	After	Before	After
<b>Prison A</b>	43	(96%)	48	(89%)	69	63	28	19
<b>Prison B</b>	77	(71%)	48	(53%)	42	39	42	44

<b>Prison C</b>	45 (69%)	45 (90%)	58	69	31	20
<b>Total</b>	165 (76%)	141 (73%)	53	57	34	31

The 'before' and 'after' measures at Prison A were taken six months apart, and in the other two prisons, one year apart. This variation was largely due to the different lengths of time required to negotiate access, agree on specific action plans, the number of issues in each plan, and to allow time for the changes brought in to take effect. The circumstances in each prison were very different.

At the time of the research Prison A was a privately run Category C male prison, managed by Group 4. The governor was already aware of the work Partners of Prisoners had done with BME prisoners in the prison. After contacting the governor, a meeting with the race relations liaison officer was quickly organised and was followed by a productive working relationship between Partners of Prisoners and prison staff. This resulted in increased communication, raised general awareness of action on race issues, and an improved willingness to work in partnership in the interests of the black prisoner population. The action plan (based on the results of the questionnaire) was formulated jointly between Partners of Prisoners and the prison's Race Management Team and there was a clear commitment by the Race Management Team to see the project through.

Prison B was a combined Category C adult male prison and Young Offender Institution. Partners of Prisoners already had a productive working relationship with the prison staff through providing regular Black Prisoner Support Groups. However, the action plan was formulated by the Race Management Team and prison management and was implemented without further involvement of Partners of Prisoners.

When the first set of questionnaires was administered, Prison C was a Remand Centre for Young Offenders. However, shortly afterwards, there was a change of regime to take only convicted prisoners. The action plan was presented to the Race Management Team once some communication had taken place between the race relations liaison officers and Partners of Prisoners. However, the regime change made it difficult for the senior management team to prioritise all of the action points, which were, in any case, not targeted at the new population. This means that the second questionnaire was essentially a new survey of a new prison population.

## Results

Since the interventions took place over different time periods and the actions taken were unique in each prison, it is appropriate only to analyse the impact of the project in each individual setting (Genders and Player, 1989; Price and Liebling, 1998). The advantage of this style of evaluation is that it can be repeated any number of times if necessary (e.g. where implementation of the action plan was not completed, where action was not successful in reducing discrimination, and/or where the nature of the prison population changes).

The results of the first questionnaires from Prison A were encouraging. They showed, overall, that race relations were good at this prison. The following key areas of potential discrimination and racism were found to be unproblematic: staff-prisoner or prisoner-prisoner physical and/or verbal abuse; access to education and training; allocation of (wing and/or cell) accommodation; differential treatment of requests and complaints; differential treatment through prison discipline; and availability of magazines and newspapers.

The immediate value of the approach to prison managers is clear. They, along with Partners of Prisoners, had formed the impression that there were more difficulties than identified in the questionnaire responses. They were also unclear where to focus their efforts for maximum effectiveness. Figure 1 shows which issues were identified as the key problem areas in Prison A; whether they were specifically targeted in the action plan, and the extent to which action produced significant positive changes.

**Figure 1: Prison A**

Issues identified as a problem by % respondents	Covered in action plan	Evidence of impact
Food provision (95)	✓	✓ ✓
Re-categorisation (58)	✓	✓ ✓
Knowledge of RRLOs (55)	✓	✓ ✓
Hair and skin products (41)	✗	✓
Requests & complaints (40)	✗	✓
Disciplinary action (25)	✗	✓
Job access (47)	✗	✗
Fair treatment by POs (88)	✗	✗

- ✓ ✓ Significant change
- ✓ Promising but not significant change
- ✗ No change
- RRLOs:** Race relations liaison officers
- POs:** Prison officers

In Prison B, the following areas were found to be unproblematic: differential treatment of requests and complaints; differential treatment through prison discipline; access to education and training; and availability of magazines and newspapers. However, in contrast to Prison A, Figure 2 shows that BME prisoners had far worse perceptions than managers or Partners of Prisoners expected about levels of racism and discrimination in most other areas.

**Figure 2: Prison B**

Issues identified as a problem by % respondents	Covered in action plan	Evidence of impact
Food provision (94)	✓	✓ ✓
Job access (63)	✓	✓ ✓
Accommodation allocation (53)	✓	✓ ✓
Bullied or threatened by POs (34)	✗	✓ ✓
Re-categorisation (36)	✗	✓
Bullied/ threatened by prisoners (24)	✗	✓
Physical abuse by prisoners (22)	✗	✓
Physical abuse by POs (15)	✗	✓
Knowledge of RRLOs (43)	✓	✓
Hair and skin products (32)	✓	✗

Fair treatment by POs	(81)	×	×
Verbal abuse by prisoners	(43)	×	×
Verbal abuse by POs	(38)	×	×

- ✓ ✓ Significant change
- ✓ Promising but not significant change
- × No change
- RRLOs:** Race relations liaison officers
- POs:** Prison officers

The value of the action-based approach was thus demonstrated in a different way. The management at Prison B responded to the action points identified from the evaluation well and, as Figure 2 demonstrates, made a number of significant improvements. In addition, the results of the questionnaire were cross-checked in some areas with existing data systems (e.g. allocation of accommodation) as suggested by the evaluators. This type of triangulation represents good practice in underpinning the translation of evaluation action points into management action plans and subsequent implementation on the ground.

Prison C provided a different challenge for the action research approach. In this case, the change from a remand to a convicted prisoner population over the measurement period means that we cannot measure the impact of the implemented action plan. In fact, Figure 3 shows that very little changed in relation to the problems identified and tackled in the action plan.

**Figure 3: Prison C**

Issues identified as a problem by % respondents	Covered in action plan	Evidence of impact
Accommodation allocation (68)	✓	✓ ✓
Knowledge of RRLOs (71)	✓	✓
Food provision (86)	✓	×
Fair treatment by POs (86)	✓	×
Hair and skin products (44)	✓	×
Job access (44)	✓	×
Verbal abuse by prisoners (35)	✓	×
Verbal abuse by POs (28)	✓	×
Magazines & newspapers (20)	✓	×

- ✓ ✓ Significant change
- ✓ Promising but not significant change
- × No change
- RRLOs:** Race relations liaison officers
- POs:** Prison officers

In these circumstances, it is clearly more important for prison managers to identify immediately the different nature of race relations difficulties within the new prisoner population so that the focus of interventions can be altered accordingly. The second questionnaire

clearly identified areas that were not a problem with the original population, but were perceived to be with the newer convicted population:

- Dealing with requests and complaints.
- Equal treatment when considering re-categorisation.
- Prisoners being bullied by prison officers.
- Prisoners being bullied by other prisoners.

In this case, the results show a clear need for a new action plan and for the evaluation to be repeated once it has had time to take effect.

## Conclusions and future research

This pilot study focused on the BME population of the three prisons studied.

The results suggest that:

The effectiveness of the action research approach has been demonstrated in Prison A and Prison B in being able to demonstrate significant improvement. The key targets established in the management action plans tended to show significantly changed or improved responses and also appeared to encourage improvement in some areas which were not specifically targeted.

- The action research approach could be considered as part of overall prisons management, and even of the inspection process, of race relations. This would help to tie recommendations to clear measures of impact. However, in order to achieve this, the approach must be underpinned with backing and support by local prison managers.
- Even with good management support, there are also other threats to the success of the approach. In Prison C, a change of regime meant that the impact of the action plan could not be measured effectively. Instead, the 'after' questionnaire identified different race relations difficulties among the convicted population than had been identified for the previous remand prisoners.
- There is a clear need to triangulate the questionnaire results with other local prison data and key events when forming the action plan and when administering 'after' questionnaires. The extent to which prisoner perceptions vary from objective records suggests an obvious area in which race relations can be improved by effective information dissemination. For example, Partners of Prisoners were able to establish that, despite the BME prisoners' perception that they were not given the same chance of being re-categorised as other prisoners, this was not objectively the case. Partners of Prisoners then ensured that information on the process was disseminated and talked through in a reflective style with BME prisoners. The 'after' surveys show that this is an important and key area in which significant improvement was made in both Prison A and Prison B.

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Tom Ellis is a senior lecturer and Catherine Tedstone is a research associate in the Institute of Criminal Justice Studies (University of Portsmouth). Diane Curry is deputy manager of Partners of Prisoners.
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Home Office  
Research, Development and Statistics Directorate  
Communication Development Unit  
Room 264  
50 Queen Anne's Gate  
London SW1H 9AT

Tel: 020 7273 2084 (answerphone outside of office hours)

Fax: 020 7222 0211

Email: [publications.rds@homeoffice.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:publications.rds@homeoffice.gsi.gov.uk)

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